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# **TANGLED**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Shannon Ashley

May 2018

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# **TANGLED**

English

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Arts

Shannon Ashley

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a collection of poems. Much of my poetry is influenced by ideas of identity, particularly religious and sexual identity, and the ways identity affects relationships. As someone raised in a Catholic church from birth, religion has had a major impact on my life and perspective. I am no longer practicing but still consistently find myself considering the morals of the Church in my actions in a positive way. Catholicism will also always affect my relationship with my mother, who is still practicing. Much of my current poetry concerns my relationship with my mother, especially regarding religion and my sexuality. I came out as bisexual to my family a little over two years ago, when I began dating a woman. The repercussions of that action are still felt and are a frequent topic in my writing, as is the tension caused by my marriage to that same woman. As a result of my experiences, all of these themes (family, religion, and sexuality) are constantly intertwined within my writing.

**KEYWORDS:** identity poetics, sexuality, religion, family, conversational language

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Sara Burge, MFA  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University

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By

Shannon Ashley

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Submitted to the Graduate College  
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May 2018

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to Edie Hays and Deidre Ashley.

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## **A NEXUS OF IDENTITY**

As a Catholic, bisexual woman in a same sex marriage, I have found my home in identity writing, but it was a long road there. Identity poetry is most easily defined as poetry about one's place in a specific social group, often one which has been in some way repressed. It evolved largely through wide-ranging discussions of what it means to be a poet who is also of a marginalized race, gender, or sexuality. Langston Hughes believed black poets should write only as black poets. Anything else was an attempt to be white (Hughes 148). In contrast, Robert Hayden supported the concept of being a poet first, condemned the idea of any singular writer as being able to fully represent the experiences of the group. He acknowledged that experiences even across one race varied, and poetry should not be limited to any singular set of them (Hayden 189). This version of identity poetics is more focused on balance between identity and the more general human experience. His tends to be the more common approach to modern identity poetics.

Gender identity poetics is similar to Hayden's approach in that, when it began, it was about finding a balance. However, women's identity poetry focused on finding the balance between writing and womanhood, which was often synonymous with motherhood. It flourished during feminism's second wave, when women finally began writing about the frustrations of being woman as well as its joys (Rich 314-322). Before then, writing as woman was a matter of concealment. If a woman wrote about suffering, it was from a distance and without spite. However, the rise of the women's movement, with its "personal" as "political" mantra, enabled women to finally express with honesty

what it meant to live as a woman (Rich 313). Writing about sexuality had a similar arc. In 1944, Robert Duncan basically asserted that people, particularly those who are gay, shouldn't separate themselves into groups. Instead, they should write only about the universal (Duncan 232). In the time since, an LGBT rights movement has grown, and LGBT writers have embraced the concept of personal as political, writing about their sexuality and its implications in their lives with gusto.

When I began writing, poetry was a catharsis, a vent to blow out all my teen angst, and that was all I ever meant it to be until I entered my first college poetry class. Until then, the only poets I was exposed to were those like Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert Frost. They were all celebrated, widely anthologized, but they felt remote from what I wanted to achieve. In my freshman poetry course, I finally learned that there was such a thing as contemporary poetry, and it was held to much higher standards than what I had been writing. I learned the difference between writing something ineffectually and abstractly emotional and writing something which used diction and line breaks to imbue images with emotion, but just learning the difference didn't mean I was able to do it.

I had spent so long vomiting emotion no one was supposed to read that I had difficulty shaping it into metaphor I would want someone else to see. In the following year, my imagery, diction, and line breaks improved, but my writing became much more distant. I wrote about ex-boyfriends and dead grandpas in cliched, general terms and explored minor images and memories. When I wrote about something meaningful, I could never manage to be specific or concrete, so I stayed away from the hard subjects. Then, the semester I took my advanced poetry class, I fell in love and came out to my

Catholic parents. The only subject I had left to write about were the hard ones. In a lot of ways, I returned to my beginning days of outpouring emotion, but this time, I had a workshop, an education, and contemporary poets to help shape my work. Primarily, I was affected by the work of Jane Hoogestraat and Andrea Gibson.

Although I knew of Jane Hoogestraat as a professor, it wasn't until my advanced poetry course that I was required to read her work. As a result of that reading assignment, I learned how to write both place and religion. As the title *Border States* implies, much of Hoogestraat's book focuses on poems of place. As such, it was the perfect book to teach me how to write place and the connection between place and people. The core lesson I learned was that place, and relationships, are in the details. Hoogestraat's poems don't attempt to give readers grand vistas through sweeping descriptions. They focus on the neighbor's pink flamingo, the shrubs by an Episcopal church, a stone house on the grasslands, or wind turbines, but through these details, we can feel the place and its connection to the speaker and the others living in it.

That is not to say none of Hoogestraat's vistas are grand or sweeping. Some of them are, such as the view of South Dakota described in "At the Edge of a Time Zone" (Hoogestraat 42), but the effects of the poems are in the smaller images and details. In the second stanza of "At the Edge of a Time Zone," Hoogestraat describes the appearance of South Dakota as so open "you will think you could see all the way/ to Wyoming" (lines 7-8). Even time is something which expands and freezes in the poem's setting where "that extra hour [holds] steady, western/ horizon stable, as though shadows won't lengthen/ when in August you can outrun the night" (lines 2-4). However, the poem ends with a small house, sitting in a prairie space between time zones, and it is this image of a

lonely cabin which lingers most. In addition, Hoogestraat ties relationship to place in her poem “River Roads,” describing a river scene she knows intimately with her desire for her companion to “know everything at once” (line 2) about that road (Hoogestraat 30). This, as well as the poem “Hyacinth Boy,” inspired me to write “The Absence of Perfume” and “Incorporated Town of Farley,” poems of place which connect not only to me but others in my life as well.

“The Absence of Perfume” could be seen as being almost directly shaped by “The Hyacinth Boy,” in content at least. While my diction and imagery is unlikely to immediately bring Hoogestraat’s poem to mind, the poem itself is about my mother’s connection to the lilac bush she planted outside the house I grew up in. Similarly, “Hyacinth Boy” is about the speaker watching and guiding a young boy as he helps her weed her garden (Hoogestraat 25). Just as the boy’s relationship to the flowers and the speaker’s treatment of him become metaphor for his greater relationship to the world and his growth, my mother’s lilacs become metaphor for her relationship to me. In contrast, “Incorporated Town of Farley” was not directly influenced by any singular poem of Hoogestraat’s but merely by her attention to place details and connections between memory, people and place.

In this poem, I chose a few individual images which most represented my home town of Farley and the changes which have occurred there since I left. Rather than trying to recreate a drive through the town or describe it in general terms, I tried to follow Hoogestraat’s example and pick only those pieces of the town which I found most striking and emotionally poignant. Interestingly, every image I focused on corresponded to a person who either lives in the town or who once did. The bridge on the way into

town came to represent not only the first sign of change but also my sister's divorce and the loss of a family member. The bank, which became offices for a cloister of excommunicated priests, represents my mother, who worked there before it was sold. In addition, her attitude towards the priests as Catholics who have left "*the right path*" (line 16-17) reflects her opinions on my divergence from the heterosexual path expected of me. The last image which receives a stanza's worth of attention is that of the Lutheran church "which I rarely entered/ but whose sign hid my first kiss with the pastor's/ son" (lines 18-20). The changes to the church represent some of the largest changes since my childhood. One of my primary places of play was removed, and the boy who doubled as best friend and first kiss not only moved away but our relationship dissolved into acquaintanceship. The result is a poem much better at providing readers with a feeling of loss and nostalgia than anything I had previously written. As someone who struggled with connecting image and emotion, these poems prove how much Hoogestraat's work helped me understand how to connect my own emotion to images and place.

In the second section of *Border States*, Hoogestraat has two poems about two different cloisters, one about Benedictine nuns and one about Cistercian monks. Both of these poems describe a complicated relationship with her religion, one marked by faith, fondness, bitterness, and doubt. In "Among the Cistercians," she writes about two different visits to the cloister, one when she had cancer and the other after (Hoogestraat 37-38). When speaking about her first visit, she inspires images of someone dying and desperate for a cure, less interested in faith than in a last ditch effort to be healed. She calls this past version of herself her "sorry nondevout self/... dying young, chemo/ setting blood on fire" (lines 8-10) and "a less clever penitent" (line 12). The description of her

second visit, in contrast, focuses on learning from the monks and is much more tied to images of connection and healing. In the first section, she refers to the incense wand used to burn frankincense as “vaguely pharmaceutical” (lines 14-15), but in the second, it becomes metaphor for “the soul gleaming/...here, there, intertwined with other lives” (lines 29-31), with the frankincense itself becoming love. There’s much more going on in the poem than that simple comparison, but it was this idea of how feelings toward faith could change over time which I most connected to.

“Among the Benedictines” had a similar effect on me. It describes a memory of a visit to Benedictine nuns and the first part, describing the moment in time itself, is full of doubt and frustration (Hoogestraat 35). The sisters do not speak much, don’t provide consolation for which the speaker is searching, and the speaker ends up feeling lost in this place she came to for clarity. However, we then become aware that the speaker is actually looking back, and her feelings on the encounter have changed. She finds “more gift than betrayal in memory now” (line 21). These poems reminded me of my own weekend at an abbey just before my Confirmation, the way I searched for something I couldn’t quite seem to find. More than that, they provided a template for me to write my feelings about my religion.

As someone who is skeptical, bisexual, and raised Catholic, I had a lot of conflicting feelings about writing anything religious, and until reading Hoogestraat, I had not found anyone else who wrote about that conflict in a way I felt I could understand and emulate. Part of this was likely due to the fact that I rarely, if ever, pursued religious poetry or read it with any dedication. When I did run across it or read it as an assignment, the way religion was approached was a far cry from how I felt about Catholicism.

Christian poets, even those who were late converts like T.S. Eliot, often had far more faith than I had ever found in myself, and I certainly did not relate to the adoration or devotion of Renaissance or Victorian poets studied in classes. The Romantics' spirituality in nature was too distant and abstract for me to understand or imitate. It did not have the rigorous ritual I expected of religion. However, I have also never hated Catholicism, and I have never been sure its teachings are untrue. I cannot belittle it the way an atheist or someone driven away from the Church might. Hoogestraat was the first person I found in the middle, who showed respect, belief, and skepticism. While Hoogestraat's poetry does occasionally read more devoutly than my own, it also expresses both doubt and the idea of a home in religion, and these were the concepts I wanted to explore in my own writing about Catholicism. In fact, one poem from this collection serves to address these ideas head-on.

"Disbelief" is about leaving my home parish and realizing that my connection to Catholicism was less based in faith and more in the culture and my relationships to the people in my parish. The connection between religion and home is most evident in the second stanza of the poem. My first stanza serves to set up some of my expectations and experiences of Catholicism. The second shows all the ways other parishes broke those expectations:

I looked for a new church  
where the ritual of Sunday felt  
like family, with choir aunts  
and uncles to sing me awake  
with their Amens and hug me  
as a sign of peace, but my church  
was not as universal as the name  
claimed. (lines 12-19)

This section of the stanza reflects the way the church became a second home for me, one I couldn't recreate in an urban setting with larger parishes. This resulted in a breaking away from the church, a choice to "[worship] my own/ uncertainty" (line 19) instead. I had always had doubts about religion, but those doubts were pushed aside by the comfort of my parish. Once I lost that comfort, I was uncertain of where I belonged. However, the third stanza proves a continued cultural connection, if not a faithful one. It recounts my attendance at a Protestant service with a friend where I could not forget my Catholic upbringing and could not stop feeling as though that service's "pattern was wrong" (lines 25-26). This experience taught me that, while I may not have the faith I once did, I will always feel both protective of and connected to Catholic culture.

In addition, Hoogestraat did not only write religion into poems about being religious. Some of her poems referenced religion in a minor way. The way it permeated her collection was reminiscent of the way it permeates one's life: subtly, always present but not always the sole guiding force. For example, "The Surprising Springs" is about moving from winter to spring (Hoogestraat 27), but it references the time of year through the phrase "early in Lent" (line 7) rather than repeating March, which was already mentioned in the first stanza, or saying "late February." I have always seen religion as a type of culture, especially if one is raised in it. Being born and raised in Catholicism comes with a set of beliefs and rites of passage which sets one apart from others, even others raised in a different branch of Christianity. It inculcates one with certain values and can serve as an even larger influence than regional traditions. Hoogestraat's more minimal use of religion in some poems seemed to recognize and perpetuate that idea, as I attempt to do in some of my poems. For example, "The Incorporated Town of Farley"



approaches religion as influential in a similar way to “The Surprising Springs.” Religion is not an overarching theme in the poem, despite a Lutheran church being one of the places in town on which it focuses and a direct reference to a cloister. Instead, it is referenced in specific merely as a characteristic of my mother, who makes a point to pray for the excommunicated priests’ return to the church when we pass their cloister. Like in “The Surprising Springs,” this reference to a religious perspective is meant as a frame of reference rather than a thematic statement.

In contrast to Hoogestraat, I found Andrea Gibson outside the classroom, on my wife’s playlist dedicated to me. Gibson is a gender non-binary, lesbian, spoken word poet who sometimes goes by Andrew and uses they/them/their pronouns. They write the gamut in terms of topics but place a lot of emphasis on sexuality and relationships, both romantic and familial. It was these poems which most affected my writing. However, rather than influencing my form or technique, they allowed and encouraged me to write poems I had avoided writing to that point. For example, their poem, “Walmart,” about Gibson’s initial friction with their family over coming out as a lesbian, helped me come to terms with and find a way to express my own anger with my parents’ lack of support of my bisexuality (Gibson, “Walmart”)<sup>1</sup>. My household was one of emotional repression, especially in regards to anger, so by the time I came out to my less than supportive parents, I had a lot of anger I wanted to express. This is most evident in “First Offense,”

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<sup>1</sup> Brief note about the poem “Walmart” by Andrea Gibson: The poem has been removed from all streaming websites, including Spotify and Youtube through which I originally accessed it. The album on which it was originally included is currently only available in versions without that track. As a result, the quotes from this poem are from memory and may have slight inaccuracies. That being said, since all recordings available of this poem before it was removed were live recordings, it is impossible to define the most accurate quote without direct reference from the author anyway. I did attempt to contact Gibson for exact quotes but received no response.

which addresses primarily my issues with my parents' inability to support my sexuality. However, it also addresses my frustration with the high expectations they held for me throughout my childhood and teen years.

I was born a decade after my sister and thirteen years after my brother, so the dynamics have always been interesting in my family. By the time I was seven, my brother had gotten addicted to drugs, dropped out of school, and been to jail multiple times. His misbehavior caused far more pressure on my sister, who was only a couple of years behind him but was much more well behaved, and me. I was held to a standard which often felt unachievable but which I managed to maintain until I came out to my parents. It was their first major disappointment in me, and it was driven largely by their religion and the idea of my loving a woman as a sin. Similarly, Gibson's parents' homophobia is driven by their more conservative political perspective. Throughout, the poem evokes their judgment and shame, but in their last line, Gibson asserts that judgment won't make them change. Their frustration culminates in the last few lines. They threaten to put up sign at Walmart that declares: "Mark and Shirley's daughter, Andrea, is a fucking dyke!" (Gibson, "Walmart"). My own poem takes a similarly defiant stance, telling readers that "I refuse to be fixed, shoved into the narrow/ confines of parental prejudices" (lines 13-14). Unlike Gibson's declaration, mine comes in the middle. I chose instead to end by questioning my parents' skewed standards because this disappointment seemed worse than any my brother had given them. My final stanza asks:

If I had come home drunk or high or had run away one  
of the hundred times I packed my bag and hid  
them under my bed instead of pretending to accept  
*save sex for marriage, boys kissing boys is a sin, weed*  
*is a gateway drug, if you drink you'll be a drunk,*  
would this girl still be comparable to Nick's first swing

at Dad with a two-by-four? Or would your Catholic  
morality have always struggled because my life  
is not near as important as my soul? (lines 19-27)

These lines are easily the most expressive of my frustration because they articulate my uncertainty over whether their disappointment is due to Catholicism or is a result of life long expectations of perfection I was unable to uphold.

“Walmart,” which is one of Gibson’s few angry poems and which comes across as both an accusation and a bit of a rant, is what gave me permission to both declare my refusal to change and ask these questions. That being said, my anger tends to be more muted than Gibson’s in “Walmart.” For example, Gibson’s poem is extremely politically as well as emotionally charged and utilizes angrier language like curse words and derogatory terms which are often used by those with prejudice against not only LGBT individuals but other minorities as well. These words are present throughout the poem but are most memorable for me at one specific point in the poem when Gibson is talking about their parents’ desire for them to date men. The type of man they want their daughter to bring home is very specific. He can’t be “no spic, no nigger, no Jew, no flaming little faggot flicking his wrists” (Gibson, “Walmart”). This language turns their parents into representations of racists and homophobes rather than the real individuals for whom they have a deep appreciation. In fact, this is taken one step farther, as the line about the “flaming little faggot” ends: “I’ll tie him to the fence myself” (Gibson, “Walmart”). This compares their parents and the reaction they had to Gibson coming out to the men who beat Matthew Shepard, tied him to a fence, and left him to die, making it arguably the most demonizing comparison in the poem. My poetry, in contrast, tries to avoid turning my parents into villains, even in anger. “First Offense” does have an

accusatory tone, particularly the final stanza, but I did try to maintain some perspective when writing it. For example, in the third stanza, my sister is brought up as a calming voice of reason, an alternate perspective, rather than keeping the entire poem in an accusatory voice. I also used less angry diction by avoiding derogatory terms and curse words. However, I cannot say whether I would have been able to maintain even a semblance of perspective balance if I had not read Gibson's poem "Marble."

"Marble" inspired me to grow past my anger and explore my relationship with my parents more deeply. "Marble" is a poem about the tension between Gibson's current relationship with their mother and their memories of her growing up (Gibson, "Marble"). The poem is comprised of contrasting statements about the mother's current views of Gibson as a "short-haired dirty-hippie man-hating queer" (line 14) and positive images of her when they were a child. This dichotomy provides layers. Rather than the breaking apart seen in "Walmart," this poem endeavors to remind Gibson's mother how they are permanently connected, with Gibson refusing to give up her right to be her mother's daughter. It lets go of the anger and instead chooses to remember that Gibson's mother is more than the woman who wouldn't accept their sexuality. She is someone to marvel at, someone from whom Gibson came (Gibson, "Marble" 57-58). This is an idea I try to keep in mind, especially when writing about my disappointment in my parents' lack of support.

The poem in which I am most successful is "236," a poem about asking my father to walk me down the aisle at my same-sex wedding. Growing up, I clashed with my father far more than my mother. We had less in common, and he put a lot of pressure to succeed on me. The result was a strained relationship and a tendency to demonize him in

my own mind, so I avoided seriously writing about him for a long time. “236” was my first success in trying to represent him as the complicated man he is, rather than the villain of my childhood. When trying to figure out how best to ask him to walk me down the aisle, at first, all I could picture was him refusing outright or getting angry the way he did when I was younger, but over the course of the year I was pondering the question, I actually managed to get to know him better than I had. I began to see his struggle between adherence to old norms and wanting to accept me as his daughter. I tried to make this change in my perception of him clear in the progress of the poem. The first stanza represents my original view of his answer as angry and uncomplicated. The second imagines his wishful thinking, wondering “if it is possible to forgive me long/ enough to hold my hand and give/ me to someone he wishes I never met” (lines 11-13). The third moves into an understanding that while I still expected him to say no, I knew he would likely regret it and wish he didn’t feel the need to. By representing this tension in him as a father, I aimed to provide a balanced illustration of my frustrations and his.

Furthermore, Gibson’s poem “Trellis,” about the trauma of sexual assault, helped me come to terms with and write my own trauma. “Trellis” is about the side-effects of being silent after assault (Gibson, “Trellis”). In it, Gibson writes about the consequences speaking out would have had on their family and the guilt they have about their silence causing another girl to be assaulted. While this poem didn’t have a direct effect on my writing in that I have not yet written a poem on that topic, it is what drove me to finally break my own silence and write about my own trauma in the poems “Definitions” and “Rape is the ugliest.” The primary difference between Gibson’s and my own writing about trauma is that the assault Gibson addresses is more straightforward than my own. It

is a legal textbook situation of lack of consent. My own situations were ones of blurred childhood memories and uncertain definitions. In fact, “Definitions” was born of my desire to break my silence and frustration over how rape is often defined in our culture. For a long time, I didn’t write about rape because I wasn’t sure if my situation counted. Legally, the lines of consent always seem to get confused when the victim is in a relationship with their aggressor, especially when one considers that marital rape is still not universally a crime. This confusion is what “Definitions” addresses. It asks questions about how to define rape and consent in a committed relationship. Finally, it asks what it means if the speaker was in a relationship with the person who raped them. How is it supposed to reflect on the person and her relationship?

Similarly, “Rape is the ugliest” is a result of wanting to break a silence. However, it more directly refers to a silence which was forced on the speaker rather than a choice. At one point, the word rape was spoken, but the aggressor’s apology belittled the accusation, turned it back on the speaker and forced it to stay there until long after the relationship ended. In “Trellis,” Gibson uses images of different kinds of death as metaphor for the consequences of silence. In my poem, I wanted the images to be just as unpleasant, but in a way that felt more physical and visceral. I chose the ugliest, hardest diction and images I could think of. The word rape became “a broken/ record screeching on repeat” (line 7-8). When it was finally said, it “[scraped]/ my bicuspid and [popped]/ from lips bruised by his ego” (lines 13-15). It is meant to both sound and feel ugly, painful, and impossible to control. In fact, this poem is probably the one in which I most used diction itself to create a physical effect rather than just a rhythm or sound. While its

content was inspired by Gibson, its style is probably one my poems which least reflects theirs.

In terms of specific influences on my poetry, one is not likely to immediately see them on the surface, with the exception of “*While You Were Just Sitting in Silence*” which is dedicated to both Andrea Gibson and Mary Lambert. That particular poem is a cento borrowing lines from Gibson, Lambert, and my own work. Beyond that poem, Gibson’s direct influence is most apparent in some poems in terms of language use. Due to the nature of spoken word as a primarily auditory art form, the language tends to be more straight forward than some poetry meant to primarily be read. This was refreshing for me. I had spent a lot of time trying to encompass narrative in imagery only, and while I still rely heavily on image and metaphor, the chance to break out of my formed linguistic expectations for poetry by using a more conversational language led to several of the poems in this collection. In these poems, among them “First Offense,” “Litany of Things I’ll Never Say,” “The Incorporated Town of Farley,” and “Education,” my diction vacillates between image, metaphor, and more straightforward speech, occasionally even crossing into direct accusation.

In short, at a time when I felt like all I had left to express was emotion, Gibson and Hoogestraat helped me figure out how to shape those expressions. Then, without even realizing it, opening up to my feelings about my family, sexuality, and religion drove me to identity poetry. The final result is a collection of poems often revolving around my identities as Catholic, woman/daughter, and bisexual. Langston Hughes wrote that an identity poet must always write within that identity. While he is referring specifically to African Americans, it is implied that any singular identity, especially one

tied to a specific culture or a place of oppression in a culture, is important and inspiring enough to write about exclusively (Hughes 148-149). I am not one to subscribe to this view largely because Hughes does not address what a poet should do if he or she belongs to more than one such identity. I cannot write only about being woman or bisexual or Catholic because I am all of them and to exclude any of them from my writing would be to exclude a major part of myself from my writing. Similarly, I am unable to write only about being a Catholic, bisexual woman. To do so would be to ignore all the experiences which may only be tangentially influenced by identity. It would also preclude me from writing from any other perspective. I still write poems about trauma and mental illness and work, and sometimes I do not want any singular identity to be tied to those subjects. They have relevance outside the debates over female or bisexual or religious existence. While I support the importance of identity in poetry, particularly identities which lack representation, I prefer to think of myself, like Robert Hayden, as poet first. However, since my identities are entangled in my understanding of every experience, even those I don't express through their lenses, and I do not feel that precludes me from claiming a place as an identity poet.

In fact, the title of this collection, *Tangled*, is indicative of the way the facets of my identity combine, constantly affecting one another and my experiences. Identity poetics often separates identity into debates over race, gender, or identity. Religion writing is rarely, if ever, referred to as form of identity poetics in America. When it is, it frequently seems tied to the concept of race. However, Catholicism has been just as influential in my life as my gender or sexuality. As such, I consider much of my writing about religion as a type of identity poetry. This places me in a nexus of three different



identities whose separation is impossible. While I occasionally write a poem purely about being a Catholic or a woman or a member of the LGBT community, those experiences and the emotions around them are often shaped at least in part by more than that one identity. For example, many of my experiences tied to my bisexuality are molded by my Catholic history, as are my experiences tied to gender. As such, my identities are tangled together, and while I can occasionally separate a part of a thread, I can never fully pull them apart.

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## POETRY

### The Incorporated Town of Farley

The sign still reads *Population 269*, but I know  
people have died, more have been born.  
My sister contributed four to the growth;  
although one was lost to divorce. For years,  
her tears were the flood waters that wore away  
the old, copper green bridge. I always drove  
down the middle, so the edges wouldn't crumble  
under my tires. They replaced it with freshly  
cemented blocks the year I left, so I would know  
I could never come home again.

The bank, once residence of my mother's career  
and my first job shredding paper, has cleared  
of tellers and cash, filled by excommunicated priests  
of St. Pius X in need of an office. Their cloister remains  
hidden by back road anonymity and trees. But I see it.  
My mother prayed for their souls, their return to *the right  
path* when we power-walked past one summer evening.

The Lutheran church, which I rarely entered  
but whose sign hid my first kiss with the pastor's  
son, has taken away my golden lit memories of gravel  
and grass, turned them to concrete. The shouts  
of pirates sailing the air in a ship shaped tree  
house have been replaced by cars and prayers.

New houses line roads which were once empty hills  
of mist at sunrise. The mercantile is a music shop  
which never opened for business. The trained pigeons  
kept by Claude, the original owner, finally all flew  
away. They took home with them.

## **Borrowed House**

I like to pretend I still have a place between  
two rivers, where fifteen minutes covers  
twelve miles instead of two, and houses are  
well-kept and owned by people who live in them.

Up there, a familiar sunshine house  
with robin's egg trim holds my boxed  
childhood in the closet, traditions fading  
next to pictures of *The Music Man*  
and a red lab that was really a chow mix.

The cobalt corner room, all blue skies  
and princess trim, and the attic, painted  
sunset hues because there were no windows  
to let real light in, hold fragments of my history,  
tea sets and Barbies whose heads pop off  
as frequently as they stay, the only bits of my past  
still useful for the next generation.

## **Ozarks**

I remember summers in a town by the lake,  
jumping off broken docks down by the lake.

In the driveway, I can still see rocks  
with crystals glittering, found by the lake.

Once we discovered an old canoe, gathering  
moss and sun, run aground by the lake.

My hair dried blonde, blazed in the sun  
but matched my family's brown in the lake.

I watched your hair turn white, thinning in the wind  
of the pontoon as its engine pounded on the lake.

Adults wore buoyant jackets as diapers to float  
across the cove as the sun beat down on the lake.

We searched the garage for life belts, wanting  
to feel the water and still not drown in the lake.

Alligator gars swam in the deep ends, chasing  
us towards shallows and snakes not bound by the lake.

When I die, I want to float on a raft fit  
for fables, set on fire at sundown on the lake.

But you we burned, then took home, buried  
you under an ash, in the ground by the lake.

## Battlefield

*After Natasha Tretheway*

Here is Springfield--  
its porn stores and corner  
preachers, broken houses  
and country bars leaning  
into asphalt and dying trees;  
its birds singing along  
with sirens, following them  
across town to find a flock;  
its streets named for plants  
and cities—each corner  
a monument to the Midwest,  
marked with Queen City  
parks and apartment complexes;  
its battalion of Baptists, chorus  
of billboards: *Call for the truth;*  
*Marriage between a man*  
*and a woman; visit*  
*our Fantastic Caverns.*

## Education

I was taught the name of every  
capitol, could pin them on a map  
of the world in fifteen minutes, was told  
that Napoleon won his first battle in snow,  
and wondered if he used his hands  
or something bigger to build his fort,

but not about a bar where three  
weeks before man stepped on the moon  
police stepped on a landmine  
of resentment when they tried to break  
the Stonewall protecting people whose love  
was illegal, dragging a hidden community  
into open rebellion for the first time.

School didn't teach me why Pride month  
is June or what was done to earn it, about laws  
that stopped men from dancing with each other,  
made women wear at least three pieces of female  
clothing. Only skirts, dresses, scarves, purses, high-  
heeled shoes. Would my jeans and t-shirt pass?

Instead, I learned about presidents and Amendments  
trying to mend a country that was always broken,  
that the cost of winning wars is dismembered  
countries, families separated into parts  
you can't sew together because thread  
isn't strong enough to heal that much loss.

## **On the Subject of my Car**

To the Walmart Mechanic:  
Yes, I understand that all tires  
are not the same, that size  
matters and is written  
on the tire, that living  
in Missouri requires wheels  
that grip mud and snow as well  
as asphalt. Telling the male  
friend behind me will not help me,  
the owner of the broken Pontiac,  
learn what I already know.

Dear White Tank Top at Break Time:  
Kneeling on the ground forcing  
air into my tires should not make me  
your heroine, and neither should my ability  
to pour blue liquid through a funnel  
into the container marked  
with windshield wipers. Did you  
not know we are able to learn about  
oil, coolant, tires, check engine lights,  
or did you just never care to?



### **Driving Delivery for Panera**

We're only visible to the ones who order  
us, wait by the door or phone. Everyone  
else is blinded by the fluorescent  
orange we dress in so people can find us  
in a crowded lobby or café. They close  
doors in our faces, cut off our headlights  
in midday traffic, and I wonder:  
If I wandered into the woods  
in November, would I be shot?

## Spoon Theory

There are dishes in the sink,  
and I can't remember  
what it feels like to stand,  
Dawn in my hands, rinsing  
them clean. These days, I run  
out of spoons too early to wash  
the plates. Instead, I collapse,  
intentions of being useful  
sinking into the couch,  
guilt assuaged by Netflix  
until you come home to put  
everything in its place again.

On a five spoon day, I run out  
before I reach my second job  
vacuuming and buying shrimp,  
oranges, bottled water, Smarties  
for an old man, let alone the third,  
where I interact with not one or twenty  
people but fifty, if we're busy.

My laundry covers the chest  
below the footboard, holding  
my conscience hostage until I muster  
twenty minutes of movement or you  
fold it neatly on top of my dresser,  
like a note telling me you understand.

If I have a day with ten spoons, I still  
run out after two hours of *here's your  
bagel, soup, chicken Caesar salad  
with extra dressing on the side. Have a nice  
day.* After a delivery, where they tip me 5%  
for my smile, I take a two-minute nap to earn  
5% of a spoon to walk back in for another round.

The shower is spattered with green and yellow  
paint from six months ago because my hands  
don't feel up to the challenge of Brillo pads  
and bleach. I had the energy that night but not  
the time, and you try not to hurry me even though  
I can see the mess chipping at your calm.

When fatigue is pulling on my eyelashes

or my brain is too numb to care if missing  
class matters, it takes one spoon to crawl from bed  
to shower after the alarm rips my lids open  
the fourth time, another to leave the rain rinsing  
away my sleep, three to get dressed and drive.  
Every class takes one spoon, or more  
if I'm standing at the front telling others  
how to do something they don't care to learn.

I remember two good years of sinks  
full of water, soaking every cup  
from the cupboard, even after four  
hours cleaning other people's messes,  
burning my hands folding jeans straight  
from the dryer, and scrubbing the shower,  
colors dripping down the drain even after  
a hard day, but I can't remember how.

## High-functioning

They say it like a compliment,  
an *oh, good you don't need much*  
*help* while you're sitting on a therapist's  
couch, trying to induce normalcy you'll never  
feel because it really means you're better  
at hiding when your fingers shake and your lungs  
collapse, means people don't recognize  
or understand breaking when they see it,  
means *but they were so happy* at the funerals  
where giving up was cause of death.

High-functioning means control, until it doesn't,  
until it's a dent in the wall because you forgot to take  
off the ring before the first hit, until it's crying  
because screaming would wake the neighbors,  
snapping at the girlfriend, boy friend, tech guy  
trying to help you because you aren't supposed  
to snap yourself, even when you just want to break  
into silence.

## Roommates

Anxiety is agoraphobic and Depression likes the dark. They stood with me the first night in my apartment, while I held frozen grape juice on my wrists to slow the beating of moth wings in my chest, and when it finally rolled from my iced-over hands, my veins burned through my skin, my bones ached, and the moth in my chest still fluttered.

Then Depression turned out all the lights and asked whether I was pretending to be happy in this shiny new kitchen. She's the big sister I always had and never wanted, the thief who stole my self-esteem when I was thirteen and learning that friends were as capable of cruelty as those who called me a man because I wore loose clothes to cover early blooming breasts.

Anxiety reached into my stomach, pulled me to my microscopic room, and sat me on the floor to wonder how I knew anything inside was real since I've been lost for years staring at expressions, trying to decide which was mine. Depression's green-eyed twin, she held my honesty hostage, told me *What would your parents think?* I tried to leave them both in the narrow safe space of my childhood, but they followed me to my new city to remind me the rhythm I hear is not a heart but fragile wings beating my own bones.

## **I Don't Remember His Hands**

That summer the carpet was an off-white  
coarseness dimpling the skin of my arms,  
the sound of its scraping on his jeans and my  
shoulders amplified in the stillness left behind  
by the other cousins gone to swim  
and the grown-ups gone to shop. The sun  
melted the curtains, buttery light seeping  
down the couch and across the floor  
to trickle towards the braid stretching  
away from my head.

Quiet pressed my ears like bubbling  
peroxide the adults used to clean out lake water.  
The tv was a murmur, and even his voice,  
so close to me, was muted. When the adults  
came home it was bubbles popping, peroxide  
silence trickling out and sound bursting in.

Sometimes you wonder why I make  
so little noise, and I hear his whisper  
creeping, leaking out of the musty  
memory box I've shoved it in:  
*Shh shh, you have to be quiet.*  
I remember his voice tiptoeing  
through the silence, the carpet  
pushing through my skin, the light  
slipping through the window, but  
I don't remember his hands.

## Swelter

Sticky air condenses into sweat that drips  
from the plain of my forehead, between  
the valley of my breasts, tickling my skin  
all the way to the slope of my stomach  
where it pauses until a rough and weathered  
hand, tanned by a history of home runs  
and skinny dipping, appears to whisk it  
away. It looks like the hand of a farmer  
familiar with the branding iron or a parent  
who thinks the belt is best, but this hand

plucks at strings, fills silence with notes that fall  
into comfortable melodies, holds my fists  
like flowers. It is a caress that takes away sweat  
and leaves a new heat behind, one that spreads,  
coalesces, and breaks like a prism of light, twisting  
my plains, valleys, and slopes into a starry night.

### **To the Artist Painting Me: Keep Only the Useful Parts**

Give my eyes a happier shape, round them into moons to stop  
gravity from pulling their edges when I smile, but leave my nose,  
its button flare and ski-jump upturn that can always smell trouble.

Lengthen my fingers, make them long enough to better hold another's,  
but keep my nails, curve their white crescents, signs of growth.

Pull my waist up and in, stretch the inch between ribs and pelvis  
so hands can fit, can hold me at my core, but leave the width of my hips,  
a shelf for everything I carry, resting place for arms and children.

Define my legs, peel away their shaking and increase their bend, but keep  
my feet with their stubborn heels, arched, toes pointed to show strength.



## Tangled

When I was a little girl, my hair  
hung down my back, blonde, twisting  
and tapering at the end, more like hay  
than gold. It was a pretty trap, heavy  
with expectations and Mother's dreams.  
She always wanted a perfect little girl  
*with blonde hair and blue eyes*  
*and freckles on her nose.* That's why  
I'm *God's surprise* and not an accident.

In fifth grade, my Sunday school  
teacher told me I would have survived  
the Holocaust, an example of Hitler's fantasy,  
but she and my mother, Catholic, brunette  
and brown-eyed, would have burned to ash.

That day, I found myself staring at my straw  
braid, confused and caught between loving  
that unorthodox method of survival  
and hating the confines of a rope  
as able to strangle me as save me.

A year later, I learned it's possible to wear  
hair down and not have a gnarled bird's  
nest on your head by the time you reach home.  
My hair seemed less like hay and more  
like butter, smooth in the sun.

Mom looks at me like she's Caesar  
to my Brutus every time I cut it shorter,  
but I cut it anyway because I love the floating  
freedom that comes every time its weight  
drops to be swept away. No more whip  
lashing out and cutting whoever's closest.  
Instead, feathers brush my cheeks, downy  
soft and fluttering, light enough to fly.

## **Illness**

When I finally tell my mother  
about my girlfriend, she says  
she's worried I'll get sick,  
doesn't understand the science  
behind AIDs, sees it as a scale  
that might tip her maybe,  
maybe not daughter  
into permanence, will kill  
her before she has a chance  
to repent, like the brother  
whose name she never  
mentioned, lost to another  
man and an epidemic.

## First Offense

I don't need Jesus to tell me I was always going  
to disappoint you, the almost nun caught in her Catholic  
mother sensibilities. My sexuality is claustrophobic  
and bright as the moon giving me her sideways smile  
with stars for dimples, and I've been living the Good  
Catholic life, Mass every Sunday and plastic,  
orthodontist grins to hide all my sins, long  
enough to know this love is flesh and blood  
poured not into a chalice but my veins.

The first kid, lost in his violent haze of neighborhood  
meth labs, was fixed by a third prison term and the right  
girl, but since this disappointment can only be absolved  
by the right boy, I refuse to be fixed, shoved into the narrow  
confines of parental prejudices.

Jessie, sister with three kids caught between bad  
boy and God's gift falling from grace, mediator  
of motherly confusion and my desire  
for acceptance, says you are shocked.

If I had come home drunk or high or had run away one  
of the hundred times I packed my bag and hid  
them under my bed instead of pretending to accept  
*save sex for marriage, boys kissing boys is a sin, weed*  
*is a gateway drug, if you drink you'll be a drunk,*  
would this girl still be comparable to Nick's first swing  
at Dad with a two-by-four? Or would your Catholic  
morality have always struggled because my life  
is not near as important as my soul?

## **Litany of Things I'll Never Say**

I wish I could tell my father how much  
I hated him for demanding every inch  
of me be good grades, straight, single, ready  
to wash the dishes, fold his clothes, could tell  
him how much I hated myself for giving  
in, could tell him he taught me what I wanted  
only mattered as collateral, something  
to be taken when I said no.

I wish I could tell my mother why I once felt  
the need to reclaim my body with words of protection  
and a tattooed phoenix facing the fire promising to burn it,  
could tell her my body felt like hers, like the boys who  
called me a man for eating the meat and potatoes she fed me  
and pushed my teeth so far into the playground a dentist  
had to polish the asphalt off, like I belonged to everyone  
who looked at me and saw blonde hair, blue eyes, big tits  
and reached out to touch, before they were mine.

I wish I could tell you all I wanted was your smile  
and to swallow your laughter, let it heat my chest  
when I was sitting alone between my own walls  
of books, wanted you to like my stomach and teeth  
and height because I couldn't, wanted to tell you  
the real meaning of consent and how you redefined  
it with your need. I wish I could tell you I was too busy  
pushing away your hands as they claimed parts of me  
I wasn't sure I wanted to give away, too busy hating  
your skin on mine when all I wanted was to sleep  
or cry, alone and fully clothed, to ever really want you.

## Definitions

PTSD is a *mental health condition triggered by a terrifying event*, but terrify, *to cause extreme fear*, isn't the right word because the T is traumatic, *emotionally disturbing*, and waking up on your stomach with no pants and someone on your back is T traumatic, but maybe not T terrifying if you know the someone, are dating him, and does dating mean consent, *permission for something to happen*?

No, it means *go out with*, not stay in with, not go to bed with or get too high to listen with, so if dating is not consent, then is waking crushed under too much skin and weight to cry or letting his coarse hands brush away your no *unlawful sexual intercourse, an act of plunder, violation*? And what does that mean?

## Rape is the ugliest

word in the English  
language. I said it once  
but his throat full of guttural  
clichés, *I'm sorry's*, choked  
out the truth, and I sucked  
it back down to ricochet  
through my silence, a broken  
record screeching on repeat  
for three more years until  
too many drinks and a kiss  
I can't remember after throwing  
up my calm shoved it through  
my gritted teeth, scraping  
my bicuspid and popping  
from lips bruised by his ego  
for too long, which is much  
more than it took to spit out  
his name with *manipulative*,  
*bastard*, *emotionally bankrupt*,  
*abuse*. Those came first, and fast,  
pushed by the taste of regret,  
copper and acid on my tongue.

### **Someone should have**

told you it's okay to shake when you go  
outside at night, to wonder if men or mountain  
lions are creeping behind each tree branch,  
run from telephone poles projecting shadow  
hands, reaching into your stomach, pulling  
you away from the lit house behind you.

Someone should have mentioned sins are subjective.  
Humans define them differently based on understanding  
of Communion, Catholic, Christian, God. Sometimes  
they are white lies told in a panic to cover scraped  
knees, undone chores, and a damaged bicycle, but they are  
rarely a way of survival, hand holding, skin touching, lips  
softening knees, elbows, hip bones, the sharp pieces  
pushing out at the world, even before marriage.

Someone should have reminded you some relationships  
are barbed wire topped fences, needles gripping fingers  
and shredding feet instead of triangles you can balance  
between before falling into the neighbor's yard and running  
towards freedom shaped like monkey bars and slides, should  
have warned you to always carry wire cutters,  
so you can make your own back gate.

## Énouement

Don't worry. One day, you will find her,  
and yes, it is a her. I wish you would give  
up on the men stripping away your wonder,  
your shooting star wishes and prayers, but you  
won't, until her. You will date every body  
willing to hold you up, revel in the hardness  
of their mouths and hands, calloused fingers  
making your scars itch until you find a softness  
you can sink into without collapsing, a featherbed  
without quills to stab you in your sleep. One day  
you will put down the sharpness held against  
your skin in favor of her hand. You will stop living  
with moth wings trying to fly into the light for a pulse,  
and the beating in your veins will slow, so she can catch up.



## **Dusty But Never Dirty**

Your *I love you* bangs my ribcage  
and your insults squeeze my throat while the sun  
sinks, cooling the ground enough for shoes to be left  
on darkening stairs. I escape the prison bars  
of your arms, and road dust clings to my soles, softening  
the rhythm of my skipping steps, a thin protection  
I need but will wash away later for the sake of indoor  
civilization, white carpets and clean sheets.

Concrete calls my toes, begging to toughen them enough  
to withstand your disgust disguised as sweetness  
as I twirl down Main Street's empty sidewalk, but I am  
not as free as my feet wish. Your hand reaches out to me,  
reigning in desire for rough contact, for one type of beating  
under my control. Fingers snake around my waist, hold  
me in place, I see shattered glass, remnants of wine driven wildness.

If I broke this bond, if my feet shimmered with sharpened  
glitter and blood and dirt sunk so deep  
bleach couldn't wash them away,  
would I be satisfied?

## Side-Effects of Loving

Warning: your bed will shrink the first night you share it with another human, a beagle, and a cat. It will never grow.

You will laugh every day because I dance while cooking or washing the dishes, and I will laugh when you build imaginary spaceships with decorative gloves.

When passing guys yell *you have a nice ass*, I will tell them *my girlfriend thinks so, too*, instead of shrinking into my clothes. If you are there, I will hold your arm to keep your anger from pulling your fist through the open window.

I will fit myself into you, make us apostrophes loving each other into quotations. When the jagged edges of my post-traumatic stress and your rage rest together, the sharpness will be softened by your fingers on my waist.

### **Upon Telling my Mother I Am Engaged to a Woman**

My apologies are fingers scratching  
at a lid nailed shut by silence.

**Floating: Galveston, TX, 1999**

At age five, I floated out  
to sea. I didn't  
know inflatable crocodiles  
could go so far.

I didn't know a rope  
waited under the Gulf  
to save me  
from the tide. I only knew

twenty feet seemed like too  
long a distance  
to swim, and I couldn't  
see my mother

through the sun on the water.  
When the salt  
from my eyes got lost  
in the salt from the sea

I thought I would never be  
found. Then the sun  
sank behind the water, and I  
could see rope

rising in the waves,  
tugging me to safety.

Sixteen years later,  
you remind me

when I'm analyzing my mother's  
face for acceptance  
she'll never feel, breaking bottles  
instead of my own

silence and crying on my floor over  
nothing  
more than being born

there is always a way back.

*Will you walk me down the aisle?*

In this version, he pauses, trying  
to say no in a gentler way  
than he's used to. Or he turns  
the red of laundry on the couch  
and dishes in the sink, bothered  
by my assumption of his support.

*Can you walk me down the aisle?*

He hears can, knows the difference  
between choice and ability and wonders  
if it is possible to forgive me long  
enough to hold my hand and give  
me to someone he wishes I never met.

*I understand if you're uncomfortable.*

This time he stumbles over words,  
recognizing my adherence to our two  
year old promise not to try to change  
each other's minds but wishing a man  
his age was capable of transformation.

I've rearranged the words and actions  
236 times over three months, but I cannot  
find the order I think will get a yes.

*This bond between us*

When you walk me down  
the aisle, put my hand in hers,  
it feels like duty, something required  
by fatherhood, but when you circle  
the dance floor with me, Phil Collins  
reminding us of winding Colorado  
roads and a time when it was easier  
to be proud of me, tears pool  
in the wrinkles of your eyes,  
more dripping from the bad side  
than good, and I feel like a six-  
year-old in a worn down truck,  
giggling at the gravity dropping  
my stomach on the hill tops,  
like the first time I saw you cry.

***While you were just sitting in silence***

*-After Andrea Gibson and Mary Lambert*

*The key to finding love is fucking up  
the pattern on purpose,*

putting down the ex you thought you'd marry  
but who wanted a man instead

and the *stares folded like hate notes* like you never

learned to yell at truck drivers who mistake you  
for a teenage boy holding my hand but only to laugh  
because I dance instead of sing in the shower.

You taste like coffee in the car and Bud Light  
at night, feel like safety all the time. My fingers  
know the texture of your skin like my mouth

knows the shape of your name. I call *your eyes*  
*"Forever"* and *"Please don't go,"* so you don't.

You stay all night and once even got up hours early  
to drive to a charity trail ride so we didn't break  
our three month streak of being each other's pillows.

*I want every piece of me to crash into every piece  
of you. I swear to God, that's how they make constellations  
like Orion's Belt, three stars that look like home,*

and before you kissed me in my kitchen or let me put my feet  
under your legs so I could touch you while I told you  
about the ex who took too many bong hits and my consent,

I knew you could be home because you looked at me  
like you can feel the music in my bones.

## **The Man She is Not**

My mother wishes I had not met  
my wife, would have married the male  
Catholic poet with sharp bones and basketball  
shorts or the Harvard theologian she found  
on a plane to Madrid, but if I hadn't met  
her, I would still be searching for a man  
who liked to bury my anxiety with his ego,  
someone who is always right,  
even when I prove them wrong.

Or I would be dating a boy whose damage  
matches my own, too many panicked edges  
rubbing against numbed memories  
of squeezed fists and uncontrolled  
breathing, a breakdown I wouldn't feel  
until we were both cut open, spilling  
our vitriol into each other's cracks.

Instead, I am laying on a couch the red  
of Valentine's Day, head in the lap  
of my Marine, watching tv and listening  
to her smile with my eyes closed.



## **New Orleans Honeymoon**

*After Ted Kooser*

The blacktop track weaves with a drunken  
stumble under shallow pools, the trolleys  
slogging behind, their pulleys and wires full  
of the sparks of water logged brakes.

On either side, wayward con artists,  
the failing bars, their little windows  
bloodshot with neon and cobwebs  
hide broken promises under their coats.

So this is New Orleans. A Tuesday  
night; June. Walking along, umbrella  
up warding off the wind, a puddle  
waiting in every crosswalk.

Behind a white washed shotgun,  
knee deep in mud, moss and mold,  
a southern live oak kicks its roots  
up and leans back into the flood.

You feel like that; you feel like letting  
the weather soak through you, like  
letting the squirrels hide in your trunk,  
like being no more than a tree in the rain,

shaking with the wind or sticky with sap  
or holding a drenched couple under your arms  
while they watch the road, waiting for someone  
to carry them home. You feel like holding

someone. You feel like dropping the umbrella  
and standing, arms out. You grab your wife's hand  
instead and keep your fingers wrapped tight  
in the dark waters, wading all the way home.

## **Spouse Support**

You are the spine holding  
my weakened muscles, pulling  
shoulders back, pushing me forward  
to keep me from collapsing under

the pressure of how good  
you are. The spine holding  
my neck up, head forward  
to face every scribbled

stress point on the calendar,  
is fragile. When it fails,  
you are my spine. Holding  
my low points in your palm,

you remind me how to walk,  
measure my steps, help me trade  
stiff-kneed pessimism for bend.  
You are the spine, holding.

## **Easter Vigil**

Standing in the middle of dust  
and wood, rising light coming  
through green, purple, gold marbled  
with pink, breaking into a thousand  
kaleidoscopes on your skin, I remember  
why God is supposed to be beautiful,

forget that the night before, my wrist  
ached from the weight of my head  
while I listened to a voice drone  
about new beginnings in the dark  
because I couldn't lean on you, my palms  
itched, wishing our hand holding  
was not sacrilegious, was like every other  
hand holding another in the candlelight.

We are permitted to touch only in prayer,  
lifting gripped hands to the sky, begging  
God to forgive, and when we share signs  
of peace, I kiss my mother's cheek,  
but I can't kiss you because that is an act of war  
in this House, especially when the bells  
have just reminded us that darkness  
is supposed to have passed and lilies  
are blooming from the altar  
where we gave a useless sacrifice.

## Disbelief

Sundays were not sleepy  
but a rush of strumming  
guitars, sermons about service  
and forgiveness, and a Father  
who loved flowers as much  
as God, kneeling to nurture  
petals in his own kind of prayer.  
I trained for every sacrament,  
even the one I didn't believe  
in, Confirming my dedication  
to a church I left two years later.

I looked for a new church  
where the ritual of Sunday felt  
like family, with choir aunts  
and uncles to sing me awake  
with their Amens and hug me  
as a sign of peace, but my church  
was not as universal as the name  
claimed, so I worshipped my own  
uncertainty until a friend begged  
for one Sunday of prayer in a House  
that was not my own, one sacrifice  
of sleep and comfort to help her find  
peace in polished pews and a promise  
that her father was not gone, but the pattern

was wrong. There was no Communion  
between faith and followers, no hands  
to hold when we asked Our Father for food  
and deliverance. Then, instead of guiding  
Parishioners to kindness and charity  
or giving them an understanding of words  
too old to easily make sense in a new world,  
the minister praised Peter and Paul, the leaders  
of my faith, for forming a community his forefathers  
left behind, nailing their disbelief into wood,  
a breaking instead of a saving.

## **The New Year**

In our house, we set our clocks by the liturgy, start our year the Sunday after Thanksgiving, move through a month of Advent candles and calendars full of candy, stockings hung to celebrate the birth of two weeks of holiday, which end with the epiphany of wise men in January.

This realization leads to six Sundays of raising God for slaughter, considered ordinary next to the weeks before of mistletoe and cutting down trees which then turn to crosses, carved during our forty days in the Lenten desert of no meat, bread, hot water, or whatever luxury you want but not too much to give up. Fridays, we drag the cross between pews to signify the stations of death before hanging it in a place we can bow to or kiss to honor its sacrifice.

This brings us to the peak of the year, burning palms and praising a boy born and raised to die, repenting of the lies we told about why we were late and the impure actions we fully expect to repeat. We spend six weeks basking in the resurrection of our faith until our divine intentions ascend with Jesus, refuse to return with the holy spirit, forcing us to face twenty-seven Sundays of droning gospels we memorized after catechism or Confirmation, losing our devotion to Ordinary Time.

## **Prayer for my Mother on her Way to Medjugorje**

*Holy Mary, Mother  
of God, pray for those  
who visit your hill  
to burn collected  
wishes for stronger  
hands or heads so you  
can see them.*

Madonna, chief  
of God's postal service,  
please do not break  
the faith of my mother  
who saved pennies  
and prayers for a year,  
ignored our whispers  
and the Pope in hopes  
of hearing your voice.

Please, meet her at 6:40  
on your cloud, veil  
trailing into mist,  
protect her eyes  
from your spinning  
sun and burning  
crosses, tell her  
she is heard or  
send an angel  
with an obscured  
face if you're too  
busy being Mother  
to the world.

## **The Absence of Perfume**

When I walk past lilacs on campus or stand  
in the scented hotbox elevators next to them,  
I see the rounded nails and callused fingertips  
of my mother's hands trimming branches of tiny,  
spring blossoms from the bush caught growing  
between her house and sidewalk. She never wore  
perfume, but she always smelled like flowers.

I tell her the blooms on campus remind me  
of her, and she calls me her sweet  
daughter, like the distance and our differences  
made her forget, says she'll plant me a tree  
wherever I eventually land. I don't tell her

I also think of the day my father moved our lilacs  
because he preferred patios to flowers and the way  
they never bloomed again or that I wonder  
if she'll still want me to remember her if I land  
with my hands holding a woman instead of a man.

My mother has always forgotten  
birthday cards, hair appointments,  
picking up her daughter after driving  
lessons, and to tell my father  
she promised to babysit on date night,

something we always laugh about  
when I come home and my father  
doesn't know to expect me  
or wonder at when the oven goes  
unheard beneath the vacuum  
because time is as forgettable  
as the lasagna baking for dinner,

but my father forgot what year  
he met her, how old she was  
when she graduated high school  
and took him to her Prom,  
that he was five not four  
when she first entered  
Catholicism in a white dress,

and I believed his memory  
over hers when he told me to buy  
her a card, wish her happy  
49<sup>th</sup>, laughed when she fought  
us, helped him tell her  
she was forgetting something  
again, like she could miss  
a year of her own life.



## **Blind Eye**

One of your eyes is sharper  
than the other. Its hard edges carved  
words into weapons thrown at every fault  
in the children who looked to your belt  
for structure, especially me, the one  
with mirror eyes and seven years  
of jagged luck reflecting my fist  
on white walls, yours on my ego.  
It still watches for sentences  
on my breath, holds my tongue  
to the roof of my mouth  
when it sees one it doesn't like.

The other eye is sea glass, rubbed  
smooth by your mother's demands  
and wife's soft voice singing  
how she loves you 40 years later,  
glinting between crevices etched  
by babies who grew into disappointments  
because their mouths were prettier  
before they learned to speak.

## Visiting the ICU, 2006

*After Travis Mosotti*

Upon entering, the world becomes white  
washed, the floors crushed ice I can feel  
through my tennis shoes, the walls,  
ceiling, and doors become glacial  
barriers separating us from the world  
outside, snowbound. Even the air is an ivory  
whisper between bone beds and white wisp gowns.

One patient is the shrunken man with grey  
hair now frosted at the ends and parchment  
skin whom I have come to see. He doesn't appear  
to be the man who raised me, but he must  
be. The only color in this alabaster room-  
red scars from a surgery that hadn't quite  
fixed him mar a chest so pallid it matches his icy  
cotton sheets. My mom asks if I'd like to tell him to get  
well soon.

## Driving Too Slowly

I try not to think about chances I missed to visit  
the man who raised a Catholic mother so kind she tries  
to forgive every disappointment her children provide,  
even sins like divorce or homosexuality;

who took me to the Smithsonian for the first time  
to help me look for the *Harry Potter* exhibit  
even though he knew *Harry Potter* was too British  
to ever land in such an American institution  
because someone I trusted told me it was there  
and we both wanted it to be true;

who drove two hours south to Virginia Beach at night  
and bought my favorite towel, a token to remember  
the water and to keep his seats dry after I ran into the waves,  
while he watched out for crabs and undertow;

who poured waffles every Easter, his laugh  
the timer, churning out breakfast for grandchildren,  
so they wouldn't look for eggs before the hunt began.

I don't think about refusing to watch him  
shrink, poisoned by his own cells, confined  
by hospital rails, waiting for a granddaughter  
driving home too slowly to say good-bye.

### **Table Rock Lake, 2016**

Sunlight trails lazy Sundays  
and sad eyes between waves,  
leaving them to be ridden  
and left behind by thrill seekers  
in the wake of boats. I leave those white  
waters to friends who want lives bigger  
than we can afford, and instead lean  
into the wind which thrums a background  
lullaby for my worries, the disapproving  
mother and the wedding grasping at the pennies  
I collect each month. Smooth green  
parts at the bow, and I glimpse  
freedom swimming between islands  
and trees, hiding in every cove.